

Our roving reporter Vicky Addinall has been out and about on London's live gig scene.



Africa Express, December, Jamm, Brixton

'This is not a jam. This is not a clash. This is not a piss up. This is not a private party. This is not really what it is, what it is, is the opposite.' When you enter a competition and win tickets for an event you usually know what you have let yourself in for, after reading the Africa Express flyer on my trek to Brixton I was, quite understandably, a little confused. What the hell was this thing I was heading to?

Arriving at Jamm, a converted house placed randomly half way down the murky Brixton Road, it does feel like I'm arriving at a large scale house party – with the I-don't-really-know-the-host worry being replaced by a guest list frenzy of PR's in puffa jackets. This is clearly an exclusive event that I'm not sure I'm going to get into. As I wait for my name to be unearthed I notice the Afro-blues duo Amidou and Mariam being led graciously through the front door, apologising as they shuffle past with their instruments. I get the feeling this is going to be a friendly affair.

Walking into Jamm any feeling of displacement I may have felt outside (I'm a 'norf' Londoner, any trip as far down 'sarf' as Brixton comes with a certain trepidation) evaporated immediately. The cosy buzz of voices and heat emanating from the African kitchen cooking away welcome me in. As I tuck into my vegetable rice and watch some strategically placed clips of Damon Albarn on his last trip to Mali I start to wonder, with no set lists or times up anywhere, when the music will start?

In typically relaxed style an hour and a few beers after I arrive a shuffle of people into the next door room suggest something is about to happen. Albarn wanders on to the stage in his usual understated and slightly uncomfortable manner to

introduce what he calls an 'organic evening' of music. Probably assuming everyone in the room already knows the details Albarn doesn't elaborate on the purpose of the night or the experiences he has had that have led to his love affair with Africa and its music. He is clearly itching to get on with what he knows best – the music.

Malian musicians Amadou and Mariam start the evening's entertainment, the blind couple's sound, for me seems to encapsulate what tonight may – or may not – be about. Mixing rock guitar riffs with haunting African vocals and rhythms they are proof of just how fruitful musical cross-cultural exchange can be. An idea clearly close to Albarn's heart, you only have to look at his own musical CV – Seymour, Blur, Gorillaz, The Good the Bad and the Queen - to see the vast range of influences he uses in his own music.

Ushered on by host and MC Stephen Budd, a plethora of artists follow on to the small crowded stage to perform: Gang of Four, Richard Taha, K'naan, Kano, Scratch from Roots, Tony Allen, Audiobullies, Terri Walker, Martina Topley-Bird, Souad Massi, Jamie T, among others. Every few songs one artist leaves and another arrives, some making their entrance half way through a song for solos and collaborations. It makes for a truly spontaneous evening that lasts well into the early hours.

It was refreshing to see an evening of music that wasn't about one artist or one performance, it was a total amalgamation of sound that left you with the feeling that you'd witnessed something quite special. Albarn, as an ambassador for Oxfam, has been inspired to promote African music and inspire cross-cultural exchanges between western and African artists. We certainly witnessed such exchanges tonight at Africa Express, but what Albarn also managed to achieve, without too much fuss or pretension, was that fundamental spark between performer and audience that should be the basis for all live music. Most of the crowd will not have known half of the artists that graced the stage tonight but for once that didn't matter, the evening was about the music and the warmth and fun it created.



The understated and organic Damon Albarn