

## **Guy Schalom & The Baladi Blues Ensemble At Dingwalls, Camden Town** **Sunday, 20th May 2012**

Any Guy Schalom gig always has to be something especially exciting, and last Sunday's Guy Schalom & the Baladi Blues Ensemble at Dingwalls, Camden Town, launching his latest album, Baladi Blues 3, clearly was never going to be any different.

How does one describe the two sets by Guy Schalom & the Baladi Blues Ensemble? From the first bar of the first set, the Baladi Blues Ensemble was an explosion of super-high octane power that simply blew one away. Although the arrangements were slightly different from the album that was being launched here, necessitated by the slightly different line-up, this did not detract from the quality of the music, the playing, or the ultra-high energy of this outstanding performance in the slightest.

Whatever it is that was driving the power house engine of the percussion of Guy Schalom's darabuka, Adam Warne's riq and Aly El Minyawawi's doholla and duff, I want some of that fuel! Their precision timing and time keeping and immense energy, and the sheer beauty of their performance, simply blew the mind and took the breath away.

Equally remarkable perhaps was Sheik Taha's quarter-tone accordion, a here not too frequently heard variant of the instrument that was also a sheer delight. Taha's playing was just breath-taking and immensely beautiful.

Also exceptional was the alto sax of Ahmed el Saidi, with a beautiful voice almost reminiscent of Turkish clarinet at times. (Sheik Taha and Ahmed el Saidi are two of Egypt's most esteemed master musicians.)

This was only eclipsed by the breath-taking flamenco guitar of Glenn Sharp and the amazing, beautiful voice and oud of Abdul Salam Kheir.

The material came from the album being launched of course, Baladi Blues 3 - The Art of Baligh Hamdi. Hamdi was a prolific composer - as well as one of the most esteemed - especially from the 1950s to 70s, writing for singers such as Oum Kulthum, Abdel Halim Hafez, Layla Murad, Shadia, and others. 'Baladi' is a form of popular, frequently fast-paced Arabic urban dance music, often based around folk music.

One of the pieces stood out in particular, Baladi Andalus, for coming so immediately recognisably from the Andalusian music tradition of North Africa and (once) Iberia, i.e., the former Arabic Empire of Al Andalus. Andalusian music itself was a joint creation of medieval Arabic and Jewish musicians, based upon classical Arabic music. The outcome of this collaboration was, and indeed still is, just glorious.

It can hardly be emphasised sufficiently just what a glorious, outstanding performance Guy Schalom & the Baladi Blues Ensemble delivered. The sheer excitement, exuberance and high energy were palpable, and the absolute excellence of it had to be experienced. Schalom's mastery of this music is as out of this world as his mastery of the darabuka, both of which are breath-taking to say the least.

An evening of absolute delight and purest joy, Guy Schalom & the Baladi Blues Ensemble at Dingwalls was one of those gigs that is impossible to ever forget. As fresh as it was refreshing, the Baladi Blues Ensemble were totally mesmerising, and brilliant. This gives a whole new meaning to 'high octane!'

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