

First Night: Grace Jones, Meltdown Festival, Royal Festival Hall

5 STARS out of 5

Where art and music collide, a star still shines

By Rahul Verma

Friday, 20 June 2008



"Pleased to meet you, your meat is sweet to me... you're my life support, you're my life sport," booms Grace Jones's 10ft-tall face from a white screen. Her face melts and stretches like the liquid metal cyborg from *Terminator 2*, as thumping tribal bass backs her android poetry.

It's an apt opening for one of the first musicians of the late 20th century to fully grasp and exploit the importance of image. A white curtain is lowered from the ceiling of the pitch-black Royal Festival Hall and rotating red and green lasers make you feel as if you're careering through space. Gutter funk signals the opening notes to 1981's 'Nightclubbing', but there's still no sign of Grace Jones.

Gradually the curtain is raised and on the platform above the bandstands Jones, the muse of pop art pioneer Andy Warhol, who also served as Keith Haring's canvas and the sleek ebony fantasy of Jean Paul Goude.

Jones is arguably where music and art collided so strikingly: the point at which Warhol, Haring and Paul-Goude meet the producers of her records.

Unsurprisingly for an artist who personifies New York disco's flamboyance and hedonism, Jones looks the part in trademark suit jacket, Independent Magazine leggings, tall feather in her hair and mask.

As she walks down the stairs, she stumbles and ends up on her posterior, so she slides down bum first, declaring this is her new way of doing it.

Jones loses the headgear and jacket for another hit, "Private Life", and exudes authority, as four-inch stilettos add to her 5ft 10 inches and heighten her regal presence. She commands her all-male, six-piece band to continue as she disappears after each song for a costume change.

She slips into patois, declaring "Let me take you to my hometown", and emerges looking like a wicked witch in a tall pointy hat and coat billowing in the breeze of a giant fan – the production and attention to detail is breathtaking.

She vanishes again but tantalisingly says, "I'm going to come out naked." She doesn't, but reappears in a black basque, stockings and those heels, with a toned body that doesn't look a day over 30 – even though she is now 60. This Jones is all woman, with short-cropped hair – not the sexually ambiguous icon with a crew cut.

The Festival Hall is on its feet as she strides up the aisles and is picked up by a guy in the audience before revelling in embrace after embrace. She comes across as warm and funny, a far cry from her cold, surly persona.

Finally, Jones morphs from a reggae-tinged cover of Edith Piaf's "La Vie En Rose" to a new robot funk-meets-thrash rock song "Man-Eating Machine". Surely Jones is the only artist alive who can pull this off?