



The **Perth International Arts Festival** program quoted **Tony Allen** as “Perhaps the greatest drummer that ever lived”. That’s a pretty tall order, and considering others who have been placed on that pedestal, like John Bonham or Danny Carey, it was sure to ruffle the feathers of many a drumming enthusiast, and definitely awaken the cynic in at least some of us. There’s no denying that Allen is a talented musician, with a career spanning around 40 years and a pretty impressive resume; collaborating with the likes of Air, Damon Albarn and Groove Armada; he’s no one to be sneezed at. Kudos must also be given to this 68 year old, who never missed a beat and hardly seemed to break a sweat, though he gave his kit a decent work-out. By no means did he make you stop and think “wow, this guy is the greatest drummer ever” though.

But what makes one great isn’t always based on prowess; what has made Allen great is his musical innovation; he gave birth to a whole new style of music: *Afrobeat*. This was apparently a revolutionary step for jazz, the fusion of traditional Yoruba ceremonial music, American Jazz and African High-life – but unfortunately to the majority of us uncouth, uncultured masses, it pretty much just sounded like jazz.

Having said that, it was actually quite an entertaining show, and it was nice to see a jazz performance without the pretentious bullshit that it usually entails. There were some pretty funky solos from various band members, but nothing that constituted the hideous musical masturbation that usually accompanies this style of play; everyone was there to add their sound to each other, and everyone on stage appreciated the sounds each other were making. Even more impressive was the re-introduction of the saxophone into the lives of those of who lived through the musical devastation that were the sax-crimes of the 80s. It was so nice to hear the soul put back in the instrument; it may just mean that next time, some of us won’t run in terror at the thought of seeing a band with a sax.

The difficult part about going to see a drummer, is that the drummer is typically your background kinda guy. Sure, they make a lot of noise, and some of them play undoubtedly complex and amazing things, but in essence, drums are the rhythm section, they exist to support the melody. Now this theory has

been turned on its head repeatedly, and there are some amazing melodic drummers out there, like The Dresden Dolls' Brian Viglione, and whole genres are built on drumming melodies, like Drum'n'Bass, but essentially, it's hard to play a lead role when you're sitting behind a drum kit. What Allen made apparent though, was the real value of rhythm within music – it's not just there so the guitarists remember to play together, it's the foundation of the songs. Allen was able to build a landscape for the other instruments to play within – he gave them a purpose, knitted them together to create an intricate tapestry of sound. This was made even more apparent by the scarcity of lyrics, which usually dominate music. The words were only there when they needed to be, they were another thread, woven into the music. This served to make the words more powerful and significant; the kind of phrases that get stuck in your head and make you really think about their meaning; like, "Don't take my kindness for weakness".

Allen was a man of few words between songs also, apologising that he's "not really one for all of that blah blah blah" he put it most succinctly by saying "the less I talk, the more I know" – it would be nice if more artists took this point of view, if you don't have anything useful to say, why not just play your music; that's why we come to see you.

A final note to those of you who have been flaked out on your couch all summer, complaining about how there's nothing to do in Perth. Take another look around; this show was part of Perth International Arts Festival '09; a festival, showcasing some amazing music, dance, theatre and visual art from around the world, which incidentally, is now finished. If you missed it, maybe make a note in your calendar for next February to keep an eye out.