

GoGo Penguin

Live from the Barbican

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time: 75 minutes, no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.
This performance is subject to government guidelines

GoGo Penguin talk to Arwa Haider about making their return to live performance.

There's something elemental about the long-awaited live return of Manchester-based outfit GoGo Penguin: pianist Chris Illingworth, bassist Nick Blacka, and the latest member of the trio: drummer Jon Scott. For more than a decade since their original inception, GoGo Penguin have become synonymous with captivating live performances, merging their jazz, minimalist and club culture influences into excitingly immersive experiences. The band have inspired various heady plaudits, including being likened to the 'Radiohead of British jazz'; really, they're unmistakably their own creative creatures, with an increasingly rich catalogue to draw from, and now thrilling new expressions to explore.

Tonight's show brings GoGo Penguin back to the Hall where they memorably presented their live original score to Godfrey Reggio's cult film *Koyaanisqatsi* in 2017. This welcome return also offers the much-anticipated opportunity to catch performed material from their widely celebrated self-titled fourth studio album, which was released on the Blue Note label in summer 2020, when the world had been brought to a pandemic standstill. Blacka is positive that they'll embrace the buzz of being back on stage, in their element with an in-person audience.

'I think that both anticipation and excitement have intensified,' says Blacka. 'When the first lockdown happened in 2020, we were in the habit of doing hundreds of shows per year and now we find ourselves in a situation where we haven't been able to play live for two years. It's something that we couldn't have possibly imagined or foreseen. We are excited to play again but it does feel like a new beginning as Rob [Turner] left the group last year and this will be our first run of gigs with Jon Scott on drums.'

Scott's widely acclaimed, vividly versatile drumming style has previously featured in a variety of contemporary outfits, ranging from Kairos 4Tet to the touring line-ups for Sons Of Kemet and Mulatu Astatke. Originally also from Manchester, his own musical career developed in Leeds (where he played a few early jazz gigs with Blacka) and London, although busy gig schedules meant that he often crossed paths with GoGo Penguin on the road, before becoming the third member of the band.

'Even though I've worked with many different artists, I've always considered myself a "band musician" rather than a session player, so becoming a member of GoGo Penguin feels like a natural extension of that,' explains Scott. 'Chris and Nick were clear from the outset that they wanted creative input rather than an uninvested sideman, so that was the main appeal – to really get stuck into making new music with the band. We found a lot of shared influences: jazz, any number of genres of electronic music, rock bands we loved in the 90s, polyrhythms, politics.'

How does joining GoGo Penguin contrast with Scott's other varied music projects? 'The two main things that spring to mind are the attention to detail on individual parts, and how that interacts with the improvisation within the music, as well as the ability to really explore production value both in the studio and live,' replies Scott. 'I've spent a lot of the pandemic working in my little studio getting deep into sculpting sounds, so it's great to be able to bring that into a band setting like this.'

GoGo Penguin's intuitive rapport has always underpinned their live performance, and this ethos continues in their latest incarnation, as Blacka points out: 'Each individual is different and each musician is different. We never thought it would be fair or respectful to ask Jon to play like Rob. Of course, with our back catalogue there are some similar things that need to happen in the drums to make the tunes sound the way they were written but we're more interested in Jon playing authentically, because that's always where the best music comes from.'

barbican

'I already knew Jon a little from years ago, but the main thing that we wanted for GoGo Penguin was someone who understood our path and our intentions. Jon really listens to what's being played and thinks about the bigger picture and his role within the group. He has a great sense of time and he has already contributed some great ideas towards some new material.'

The *GoGo Penguin* album certainly exudes a distinctly invigorating, exploratory energy as well as introspective beauty, from the exhilarating pulse of 'Atomised', to the elegantly emotive 'Totem', and the vivacious melody and resonant rhythm of 'F Maj Pixie'. Last year, this album also inspired a classic remix project – *GGP/RMX* – with reworkings from legendary international musicians, DJs and producers including Squarepusher, Cornelius, Machinedrum and James Holden. While there haven't been plans to adapt *GGP/RMX* arrangements for this live date, GoGo Penguin's innovative concert lighting have always characteristically heightened the intense, clubby atmospheres of their music, and long-time collaborator Lewis Howell has designed new visuals here:

'Lewis has great vision and intuition with lighting and always seems to know how to create the right atmosphere for the music,' enthuses Blacka. 'We've worked with other lighting engineers in the past and it's always been great, but having someone who's part of the touring team who's into the music and knows the set inside out is incredible for us. Lewis brings his own energy to the shows and you can feel it in the room. He always likes to do something unique for each tour and on our last big tour he had these huge aluminium discs made that hung above each of us on stage and projected the band logo onto each one. When I've seen photos back from the audience's perspective afterwards, it looks amazing.'

'There are so many moments in the set, it's difficult to single out specific tracks. On the last tour we'd often play 'Transient State' [from GoGo Penguin's 2018 album, *A Humdrum Star*] for the encore, and it starts with just a rhythm on the hi-hat. Lewis would manage to hit each strike of the high hat with a strobe light. When we were touring, night after night, he would have it with pin-point accuracy.'

There's an expansive set-list to relish and a live energy to reconnect with here, besides enticing new projects to look forward to. Over the past year, GoGo Penguin have composed further film soundtrack work (for the French independent drama *Memento Mori*), as well as an EPs worth of new material that they are looking forward to releasing this spring.

'I've been enjoying getting stuck into huge chunks of the back catalogue,' enthuses Scott. 'Obviously, there are some of the really well-known tunes that I don't need to mention. I'm always drawn to the trickier rhythmic ideas, so a track like 'Reactor' was an early favourite, as well as 'One Percent' of course. Some of the material from the last album the hasn't been played live yet, so it's a nice opportunity to work out how to bring it to life; 'Signal In The Noise' and 'Kora' are some favourites from that. As for the brand-new material, it's all exciting; we'll have to wait and see how much of that makes it into the new set.'

Performers

GoGo Penguin

Nick Blacka bass

Chris Illingworth piano

Jon Scott drums

Lewis Howell lighting design

Produced by the Barbican



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