

Goddesses on parade  
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Bernadette McNulty reviews Songs of Innocence at the Meltdown, Festival Hall

It was, without doubt, ladies' night at the Meltdown Festival, but despite the heat, there wasn't a Bacardi Breezer or mini-skirt to be seen.

"It's like I've been let into an oasis of female icons!" gushed Tim Booth, former lead singer of James and one of the few men to join the constellation of musical goddesses Patti Smith had attracted for her Songs of Innocence night.

Beth Orton, Tori Amos, Yoko Ono, Marianne Faithful, Kristen Hirsh, Sinéad O'Connor and Smith herself - it was like a Who's Who of revered women singer-songwriters of the past 35 years. Miranda Richardson called it "Patti power". Whatever it was, the adoring audience was here to worship it.

The theme of the night was lullabies, poetry and protest songs for children as inspired by William Blake's verse. Richardson and Tilda Swinton performed the poems like church sermons in beautiful, serious voices and Smith kicked off the music with one of her elemental incantations of Birdland.

Billy Bragg gatecrashed before his own show began, and in what was to be a rare moment of lightness, bounced up and down to a Willy Guthrie ode to bedwetting. Beth Orton, spookily resembling a gangly young Patti Smith, did an endearing Guthrie too, perfect for her tremulous, breaking voice.

Upping the glamour stakes, Amos flew on and delivered her trademark possessed séance at the piano. Like a splay-legged minotaur with the head of Venus, she looked as if she might have stepped out of one of Blake's surreal paintings that hung over the stage in the background.

But it was the arrival of the older goddesses in the second half that really sent the congregation into raptures. Yoko Ono slunk on stage and with her shamanic wailing in four short minutes had spirited up the joyful uninhibitedness of a child, followed by Working Class Hero from Marianne Faithfull, a rousing call to arms. A delighted Tim Booth, sandwiched between the two, thanked the women for the honour with a rare rendition of Sit Down.

The last part of the evening descended into the dark lullabies of Kristin Hersh and Sinéad O'Connor. Folk singer Eliza Carthy best summed up the over-riding mood: "What was that? Sing something cheerful? What do you reckon the chances of that are?"

Finally, Patti powered the somewhat shy women on stage together like a nervous girls' school choir for a faltering close, and in a mood of exhaustion, the vision ended.