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## Folk Britannia, Barbican, London ★★★★★

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Conceived as a showcase for some of England's finest female singers in last year's City of Culture celebrations in Cork, Daughters of Albion proved to be the jewel in the crown of the Barbican's three-day celebration of British folk, presaging Mike Connolly's Folk Britannia series on BBC4.

The Daughters of Albion may sound like the title of one of Blake's prophetic books, but numbered Norma Waterson, her daughter and the night's MC Eliza Carthy, the marvellously intense June Tabor and, from the Nineties generation of female singers, a heavily pregnant Kathryn Williams, ex-Lamb singer Lou Rhodes, and the vocal explorer Sheila Chandra.

The latter on "The Quiet Joys of Brotherhood" was stunning, while Norma and Eliza carried the weird atmospheres of Tom Waits's "Strange Weather", backed by the fluid ingenuity of arranger Kate St John's fantastic 10-piece band.

June Tabor's account of Lal Waterson's fearsome "Fine Horseman" and the traditional ballad "Fair Margaret and Sweet William", were typically overwhelming. Kathryn Williams delivered a heart-aching version of Ewan MacColl's "The First Time", with his son Neill on guitar, and was joined by Eliza Carthy and Lou Rhodes on a soaring rendition of Kate Bush's "This Woman's Work".

This was followed by the surprise appearance of Vashti Bunyan, some 36 years late, to sing one of her now-classic songs from the great "lost" album of mystical English song, 1970's "Just Another Diamond Day". She was the headliner for the third night's "Into the Mystic", focusing on the "neo-folk" of a new generation of acoustic singers - including current favourites Adem and King Creosote.

Former Incredible String Man Mike Heron performed an ebullient set with his daughter Gail - their live debut - while Bert Jansch delivered an intensely focused solo spot, joined later on by Bernard Butler providing sparse figures on electric guitar.

But it was Vashti's night, as she closed the final concert with a 40-minute, nine-song set, backed by her producer Max Richter, the string quartet Vetiver and a band that included Adem on harmonium, and, at one point, at least six guitarists.

Given folk's mutability, it's no surprise that Ewan MacColl provided one of the highlights of the women's night with "The First Time", while being a major focus with his social songs of the opening night's "Which Side Are You On?". Billy Bragg proved a voluble compere, and there was a continual shifting of personnel - including Donovan, Martin Carthy, Dick Gaughan, Maggie Holland, and Robb Johnson - each adding their considerable weight to the common songbook of social dissent, unrest and protest.

The emphasis was on the songs of MacColl and Guthrie, with Donovan, still giving off vibes of youthful exuberance - at least from a distance - returning to his earliest Guthrie influences with "I Aint Got No Home". Andy Irvine delivered a towering Tom Joad, while MacColl's sons Neill and Calum chose more intimate songs from their parent's repertoire, including the beautiful lullaby, "Father's Song".

Mighty Dick Gaughan delivered a show-stopping version of his great anthem, "Outlaws and Dreamers", as well as covers of songs by MacColl and Leon Rosselson, and after a closing "Between The Wars" from Billy Bragg, the encores began with Bragg returning alone to the stage, with the explanation that "everyone had gone out for a smoke with Dick".

There can't be many better excuses for non-appearance, but they came back for a massed rendition of "Dirty Old Town", a song that must have closed thousands of evenings in the country's clubs and bars.

With more than 12 hours of live music, Folk Britannia demonstrated that this music outlasts anything you throw at it - fame, irrelevance, electrification, commodification. It's too unruly for the Left or Right to own, and with enough mystery and heart to renew itself in every generation. These concerts were a testament to a culture in resurgence.

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