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One Man's Ceiling Is Another Man's Floor

Paul Simon's tribute at BAM was a triumph. So why'd he look so glum?

By Justin Davidson

The Brooklyn Academy of Music's three-part, month long festival of Paul Simon's music was a crushing rejoinder to those who would itemize the duds in his catalogue and hold them against him. Simon has written indispensable songs by the cartload; he has chiseled, enameled, and assembled them into intricate mosaics; and he executes them with one of the tightest bands in popular music, captained by the astonishingly versatile guitarist-cellist-saxophonist-everythingist Mark Stewart. The BAM concerts made plain the mutual generosity of Simon's collaborations: He collects a community of superb musicians who nourish and excite each other. The phenomenal Brazilian singer Luciana Souza channeled Simon without imitating him, letting her voice burble over syllables and stretch sensuously across his winding melodies. I could have spent the whole night listening to her enunciate the syllables "Can't run but," which she made at once liquid and percussive. David Byrne chopped up "I Know What I Know" and "You Can Call Me Al" with his manic staccato, revealing the extent to which he and Simon share a surreal X-ray vision of America.

In the program titled "Under African Skies," Simon proudly laid out his collection of exotic influences—Amazonian cross-rhythms, Caribbean dances, the insistent lilt of West African guitar playing, the iridescent harmonies of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, and the cloud of cotton-candy doo-wop that drifts like a childhood memory through his songs. The chirpy sound of the fifties acts as shorthand for wistfulness, loneliness, and loss. Anyone can scavenge from the world's library of styles; Simon forges his enthusiasms into a powerful personality and wraps weighty lyrics in buoyant music.

It's possible that he is less than thrilled with being venerable. On the first night of "American Tunes," the final part of the tribute trilogy, he stayed mostly in the wings. Now and then he stumped onstage with all the enthusiasm of a postal clerk on tax day to sing tunes that must seem antediluvian even to him. Maybe the gloomy electronic rumble in the version of "Graceland" by the Brooklyn band Grizzly Bear depressed him, or Josh Groban's cruise-ship-entertainer's take on "America." Or perhaps he just had a cold. Things finally picked up toward the end, when he got around to more recent material. "How Can You Live in the Northeast?" (from his 2006 album *Surprise*) is a dejected expression of how hard it is to live in a fragmented world, but with its layers of grinding and sparkling guitars, it's also an argument for Simon's own perfectionism, a statement that in a hopeless and vulgar age, craftsmanship and care still count.