

The Sentinel

Amsterdam

Integrity, heart, humour



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‘Damon Albarn was headlining
the festival’s closing concerts’

By Denson Pierre

The Sentinel was invited to return to Poznan during summertime as the organisation responsible for promoting the city and its culture to Amsterdam and the rest of the world, together with their partners on the ground, find us to be an open, honest and beautiful publication. This is some responsibility to shoulder when all we are doing is ‘our thing’ with dedication and creativity as fuel. It is though with this generally non-neurotic attitude that we leave ourselves open to the most interesting and often unexpected social adventures while travelling through cultures.



‘It is not possible to feel anything else but emotional and humbled’

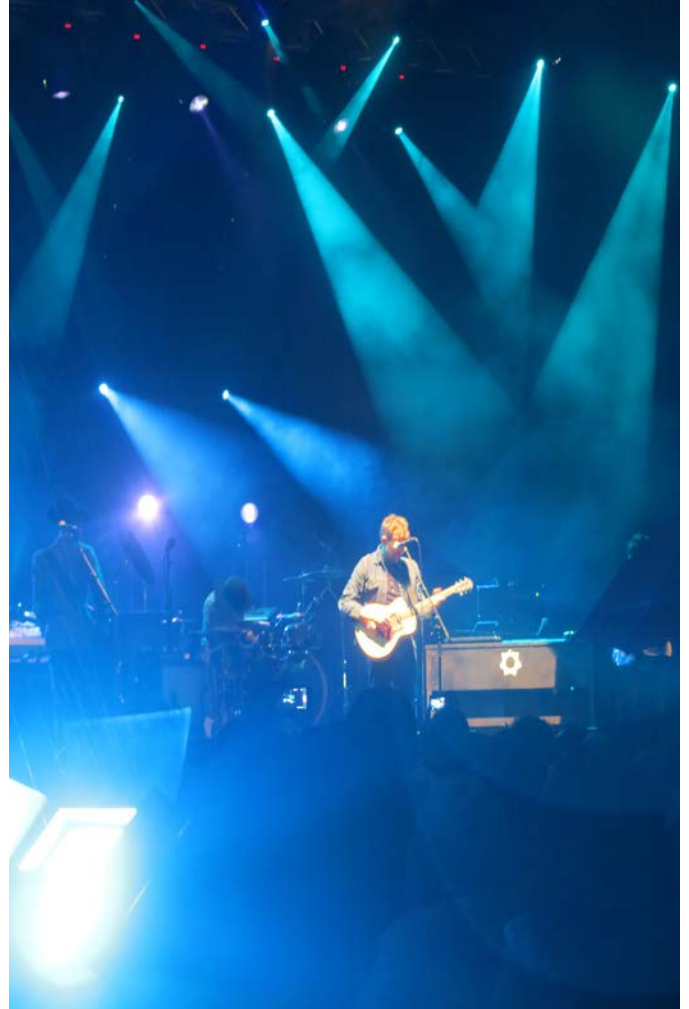
It is worth mentioning that very early on during this visit I was reintroduced to the passion of the local community when it came to how they chose to show appreciation and somehow what the social mores dictated in terms of both historical and contemporary style and expression.

A mere two evenings before I flew to Poznan I happened to meet a young, friendly, European gentleman at a frequented, A-class drinking and socialising establishment within Amsterdam’s historic entertainment district. In no time at all he was to establish that I was due to visit what turned out to be his hometown. As much as he was happy that an Amsterdammer could be visiting his beloved city, he nonetheless felt the need to lecture me on what to look out for just below the surface of all of the beauty and friendliness he knows his city to be famous for. He described it as a bit of a ‘*dark side*’ in the thinking of those charged with administering the lives of Poznans (the Catholic Church, right-wing politicians and scared civil servants). Marek spent a good amount of time explaining what he could hardly intellectualise. He had been living and working in Amsterdam for a period of mere months and could not believe the difference it made to every aspect of his life. He reported that the city and the Netherlands had freed-up his thinking, and in so doing made it possible to better enjoy the ‘*life force*’ that comes with being encouraged to practice free thought toward being creative and productive. All

of this and I had not yet packed... Marek let me know that it was his thinking that the church was only able to spoil anything progressive that could possibly evolve in his city and to only do so by engaging blatant hypocrisy in the knowledge that so many of the local (and national) citizenry literally have the *fear of god* pumped into their psychology, and could be relied on to back any of the medieval dictates that occasionally sprung from Poznan City Hall.

Now, part of the reason for my visit was to make a report on the Malta Cultural Festival taking place across Poznan for the 24th time. Due to other work commitments and the World Cup I was only able to arrive on the final day of the festival but that seemed fine as I would eventually meet the organisers and do an interview to summarise key aspects and offer some PR for future editions. It was also the case that Damon Albarn was headlining the festival’s closing concerts (29/06/14). Not a bad bit of planning as there was a new solo album [Everyday Robots] and Albarn is a fine A-lister to match the profile of such a festival. “Nothing could go wrong with this plan” I was thinking as I tried to ignore the slight choppiness across the skies of Germany brought on by a huge weather system producing disturbed air all the way from Amsterdam to Poznan. I was yet to land.

On landing everything went into overdrive. One of my first questions to my host from the local tourism



‘Local electro-dance duo – Rebeka!’





‘A rather intimate portrayal of a successful musician and man in his forties having fun on stage’

promotion office was to do with how the overall festival had passed and how indeed had the rainy weather affected attendances etc. The diplomatic reply indicated that the entire festival had been guided into an existential crisis, somewhat. It was the case that a decision by a local administrator, maybe without him realising it, was indeed an act of censorship which ripped the spirit out of the entire festival. The decision made apparently stemmed from criticism of the central theatrical piece to the entire festival for having made use of reworked text from the bible and other unreligious references. This led to the cancellation of the performances **and set the debate about censorship alight not just in Poznan but nationally. You know a controversy has hit raw nerves in Poland when Archbishops are to be found at rallies. When the church comes to town in Poland today, not many other ideas can prevail. I will come back to this topic after my next trip to Poznan as for now the issues are too real for those finding themselves up against the establishment, having a very modern, if belated, and important argument.

After this strange news we needed to get into the mood for the evening's concert. I was taken past the leading beer cafe of Poznan [Basilium] for a re-visit and to have a swift best of Polish brew. To my utter surprise, I was directed to the large, creative display wall of the chic establishment where, in full professionally printed, framed splendour and central to the display, was a sample of the Sentinel piece I had put together

on Poznan from my first visit there during the autumn of 2013. Now, when this sort of thing happens it is not possible to feel anything else but emotional and humbled. It is so nice that the Poznans appreciate what we do and wish to even display it as art. It felt like coming home to a warm kiss and hug.

The Gig

Poznan has so many ideal venues for the many different types of performance-based events. Now we were in this courtyard of the former gas works which had managed to maintain all of the exciting outer elements that are now so popular across Europe where all that was once industrial, turn of the twentieth century architecture and design is now in vogue. Soaring chimney stacks and gorgeous brickwork made for attractiveness set against the grey and weeping heavens. The venue (courtyard of the gas works backing onto tenement blocks) is cosy, cosy for a five-thousand strong crowd.

It often happens that support acts can seem like fluff to be dusted away while you busy yourself at the bar and surroundings of such a grand, outdoor concert setting. Not so here. We had local electro-dance duo – Rebeka! An exciting and tightly produced swerve through multi-instrumentalism, barricaded by banks of synthesizers, keyboards, samples and drum machines. It just makes you think of Heaven 17 meeting trip-hop by bypassing techno-dance music. Of course, the female-







‘A physical message that you too should shake your ass to their many wicked beats’

male dynamic makes you think of The Eurythmics. The female member of the duo [Iwona Skwarek], is surely an eye-catcher who invests the very enjoyment she gets from their own music into a physical message that you too should shake your ass to their many wicked beats. A pleasant surprise and I may well need to check out some more of their music as soon as I can. This could be a band to lead the Polish-wave into Euro significance.

Finally, I was to see Damon Albarn live. Albarn is an artist greatly respected by fans of pop/rock and especially those of his generation. He seems a really nice person who has shown movement and maturity through uncomplicated music over more than two decades, so ensuring that he has millions of fans around the world and across the many genres he has touched musically. Here in Poznan, I suppose even he had to be amazed that, though such a gig - following on from a recently released album - that his Poznan fans would already know most of the words to the numbers. This solo departure is naturally more downbeat from much of his previous work and with the happy, sing-along rapport soon established, it turned into a rather intimate portrayal of a talented, successful musician and man in his forties, having fun on stage together with his very accomplished backing band, to an audience completely sold previously on his charisma.

Nice, super-professional pop with a few atmospheric dashes through dub and reggae. Pleasant and fitting to the damp conditions and enough to even turn neutrals into fans. Oh, all of the serenity was abandoned when, per encore, Albarn was to return to the stage, Gorillaz mask and all, to introduce the Ghanaian rapper from Clint Eastwood fame. I never expected that Poznan could scream, jump and dance so hard to this super-classic from Mr Albarn's locker.

The next morning it was mostly sunny and a stroll around Poznan was in order.

**** malta-festival.pl**

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poznan.travel

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