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Beth Orton - The Barbican, London 03/07/14

BY [ED NASH](#), 06 JULY 2014, 20:53 BST

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Photo Credit: Matthew McAndrew

Beth Orton is a brilliantly down to earth artist who writes extraordinary music. Having emerged from the electronica of the 90's, she's refined her path into an increasingly folky direction – think *The Wicker Man* without the creepiness. Tonight is theoretically focussed on her triumphant second album *Central Reservation*, but songs from all of her records are interspersed throughout the set. It's a celebration, not an indulgence in nostalgia and the suitably palatial Barbican Hall is the perfect setting to mirror the understated grandeur of her music. But most of all it's an event that reaffirms how much her audience love her.

Clad in a summer dress, with her band distinctly dressed down, it's immediately apparent this is going to be an evening of intimacy; all that's missing is a campfire. Opening with the brooding "Stolen Car", she stands stock still with what appears to be glacial poise but she quickly confesses that she's nervous, prompting the first of many "We love you Beth!" declarations from the enchanted audience. She eventually rewards them with a wonderfully charming aside, "Oh, thank you, I love you too!".

Next up is the supremely nonchalant "Couldn't Cause Me Harm". The staccato guitar, double bass, drums and xylophone conjure a supremely sparse rhythm, the pacing of her resolute vocal moves the song through its several gears and her nerves visibly abate as she starts to skip around during the refrain. The slightly ditzy speech that follows, "We did these three little gigs to celebrate the release of... oh, what's it called? Oh yes, *Central Reservation*", shows the lovely counterbalance of her charm – similar to the self-depreciation of **Victoria Wood** – against the fact that musically she's the modern day equivalent of **Joni Mitchell** in her 1970's pomp.

The opening bars of "Sweetest Decline" get the loudest cheer of the evening. A poignant tribute to her late mother with a crestfallen melancholy at its heart, the piano tinkles fittingly sound like **Van Morrison's** "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?", this is a song of devotion after all.

"Central Reservation" itself is a song about living in the moment and the sense of euphoria at the closing of the thrill of the chase. "Running down a central reservation in last night's red dress/And I can still smell you on my fingers and taste you on my breath." Starting with just voice, guitar and bass, the intimacy is startling but when the drums kick in after the brilliant pause of "It's like... It's like..." it becomes a perfect hybrid of the original and **Ben Watt's** interpretation.

A solo version of "Pass In Time", tells the heartbreakingly beautiful story of her relationship with her mother. "My mother told me just before she died (Oh darling

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relationship with her mother, my mother told me just before she died/Oh darling, darling, don't you be like me, you will fall in love with the very first man you meet." A glance around the crowd shows that people are literally in tears, it's the pinnacle of a night of wonders, a memento mori. Then she's off and the crowd are on their feet.

For the encores her first single, the still remarkable "She Cries Your Name" gets a welcome airing, and you think 'what a voice!' as the band ramp up that compelling sparse swagger of theirs. Then she unleashes a solo delivery of the defiant "Feel To Believe", its peaks and troughs still pack a mighty punch and the crowd are so rapt you can hear a pin drop. However the audience aren't ready for her to leave just yet and are treated to the beguiling "Shopping Trolley", then she departs, leaving the hall in a besotted awe.

Tonight saw the welcome return of a phenomenal talent whose natural ability as a songwriter, singer and performer is proof that she deserves to be a national treasure.

Photo by [Matthew McAndrew](#) from Glasgow ABC. [See the full gallery here.](#)

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