



"Let's see what happens," Robert Plant says at the start of his set from the stage of London's O2 arena, site of the 2012 Summer Olympics basketball and gymnastic events. But Plant's visit to the world's busiest venue occurred in '09 for Rockwell, a benefit for musical therapy charity Nordoff-Robbins.

"It's at least out on the edge, a bit experimental," Plant said, introducing his reworking of some classic Led Zep for the occasion. "Black Dog" has been reborn as a steamy jungle trek, with Gambian musician Juldeh Camara taking the lead on kologo, an African banjo-like instrument with two strings made of nylon fishing line. The Dog loped along at first, but Plant and company brought it to a howling conclusion with drummer Clive Deamer (Portishead, Radiohead touring bandmember) slugging the skins like Bonzo for a Zep gut punch.

Plant revisited Bukka White's "Fixin' To Die" from his '02 Dreamland release, with Camara on lead, this time playing the one stringed ritti, an African version of the fiddle. The high pitched sound of the ritti is closer to a harmonica than a violin, and even though it only creates one note, with Camara's timing, it works as well as a lead guitar line.

Plant had the women in the audience squealing when he teased them with "hey hey baby/ gonna make you sweat/ gonna make you groove" intro to "Whole Lotta Love" before he did "Fixin to Die." And when he got into it for real, prowling the front of the stage, yowling like his youthful shirtless self, all the squalls intact, backed by a ton of reverb, it felt like 1970. He let it slip back to Africa for a few moments with more one-note scrapings from Camara, coming back in singing softly at first, stepping up the tempo gradually till the thing slammed to a big wailin' finish that had the crowd on its feet going nuts. "That was a real blast," he said before leaving the stage. "One more rehearsal, and we got it."

Joss Stone was also on the bill, barefoot in a skin tight sliver sheath, backed by a gospel/soul trio of black back up singers. Stone shimmied and wriggled through a poppy, soul inflected "Free Me," dipping into some '70s Stax-style soul for "Super Duper."

Aging lecher Tom Jones struggled to keep his eyes locked on hers as she sashayed and simpered beside him for a very uncomfortable to watch version of "Its Your Thing" that came off as squally and contrived.

Jones' behavior was even stranger on the encore, "Let It Be." He came out waving a sheet of paper over his head as if he was holding a winning lottery ticket. "Got the words for this one," he said proudly. It's hard to believe that an artist who has been around as long as he has doesn't know the words to the Beatles classic, but he dutifully read all his part from the sheet, never taking his eyes off the paper. It's a trainwreck, with Stone babbling and whooping on top of the mess.

Plant's participation makes this a keeper, and the Stone / Jones juxtaposition is so bizarre that it's worth repeated viewings as well. File this one under bizarre, but keep it handy for parties- it's a real ice breaker that packs a wallop.

Rockwell
Various Artists
MVDvisual