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Pee Wee Ellis with Jason Wilson, Jay Douglas & friends



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Reggae got soul (and funk, and jazz, and blues ...)

by Sebastian Cook with photos by Roger Humbert

In addition to his reputation as one of the world's most unique and creative reggae artists, keyboardist and singer Jason Wilson is renowned for his taste in bringing wondrously talented and somewhat under-the-radar artists to Toronto. On a rainy Friday night at Hugh's Room, Wilson added Pee Wee Ellis, the legendary James Brown and Van Morrison tenor saxophonist and arranger, to that illustrious list with an unforgettable concert that joyously journeyed through reggae, jazz, funk, soul, rock & roll, pop and even a touch of the blues.

The show started with a personal favourite from Jason Wilson & Tabarruk's 2004 album *Dread & Blue: A Canadiana Suite*, the rollicking reggae/jazz instrumental "Soon Come, Jackie". This song began with a barreling, almost ragtime-recalling opening piano melody from Wilson, stopping on a dime for the horn section to announce itself with a brassy, ska-infused blast and a trading of solos from Tabarruk's horn section of tenor saxman Marcus Ali and trombonist RJ Satchithanathan. From there, it shuffled into a bouncy reggae beat behind the crackling drums of Iain Green and Andrew Stewart's sublimely subtle bass — nothing fancy, just a slow, beautifully deep and rich tone that sustains itself as long as any bass sound in this city this side of Rich Brown. A dubby breakdown led into a call-and-response between Stewart and Wilson of machine-gun slap-bass and piano, back into the melody and home to the end. "Begin" was next, a new Wilson track from his upcoming *Peacemaker's Chauffeur* recording that had an appealing ska/rock steady/jazz vibe; with Elisa Gold offering a female-harmony dimension I had never heard before on an original Wilson tune.



Jason Wilson & Andrew Stewart



Pee Wee Ellis & Elisa Gold

He then introduced Ellis as "one of the most influential sax players of the 20th century" followed by something to the effect of, "I can't believe I'm playing with him." Ellis introduced himself with, "Hello". This large and ironically monikered Southern gentleman did not immediately take over the stage, settling in with the band as they took the tune from a slow, jazz/blues tempo into a reggae beat. Ellis' first masterful solo had the effect of making a rapid-fire tempo sound almost casual, with a Wurliitzer keyboard sound from Wilson then buzzing subtly in over top. Trombonist Satchithanathan rose to the occasion with an inspired solo, followed by Ali in the same "Okay, time to put our game faces on!" spirit. It was with Ellis' next salvo that he brought what I had come expecting to hear — a remarkably clear and authoritative tone ascending and descending with incredible smoothness, reminiscent of his fellow James Brown alumnus Maceo Parker and the blaxploitation soundtracks from the early 1970s. After the number came to a close, he introduced it as "Blue Bell Pepper" from his most recent recording *Different Rooms* and jokingly asked the audience, "If you figure it out, let me know." No ego or pretense

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whatsoever, just musicianship saying all it needed to say.

James Brown's 1966 classic "The Chicken" was next. Stewart on bass once again shone through from the start. Then, a gorgeous mid-range trill led off another Ellis solo, from which the song settled into a head-nodding 12-bar funk & blues at which point I began wondering how many hip hop songs over the years had sampled it. Towards the end of "The Chicken", Wilson gave us a Southern-rock style piano salvo straight from Gregg Allman's playbook. It was time to bring on the fried chicken, because now the show was officially cooking with gas.

"How you enjoyin' it?" Ellis asked, obviously rhetorically. After a loudly affirmative response, he simply said, "Then stick around!" It was time for some rock & roll with "Back On Top" from Van Morrison, whose band Ellis music-directed in the late 70s and early 80s. While his stretching of the reggae envelope, piano playing and compositional brilliance will always be his strong suits in my mind, there are times when Wilson's voice finds its comfort zone and truly commands a tune. This was one of them, and it carried beautifully into "Days Like This"; enhanced all the more with the sublime backing harmonies from Gold. "Mama told me there'd be days like this", but she couldn't have predicted these kinds of evenings.

Closing the first set was another funky rock Morrison classic, "Cleaning Windows." This was the first time to shine for guitarist David West, who plays a custom-made double-sided axe that has a traditional six-string set up on one side with a fretless configuration on the other.

The second set began in a similar fashion to the first with "Confucius" a 1965 Skatallites classic that pays homage to one of Wilson's heroes, the late Jamaican keyboard legend Jackie Mittoo. The familiar reggae/ska/rock-steady tempo was updated for the times with some more stunning bass work from Stewart and Wilson's Latinized piano melody. Next up was the signature song from *Dread & Blue* "Keele Street". This tune could be considered the essential Jason Wilson: a rhythm strong and bold enough to satisfy the bottom-end hungry rasta reggae lover, the horn-heavy harmonic savvy of a master jazzman, and lyrics that juxtapose the Keele Street home turf of a proud Scotsman with the teeming London suburbs where the British reggae that inspired his love of the genre was born. (Jason Wilson is a cousin of UB40's Michael Virtue.)

Guest of honour Pee Wee Ellis returned for the title tune from *Different Rooms*, with a typically understated, "Thank you." This one was a slow and melodic shuffle-blues ditty highlighted by terrific interplay between West's incredibly resonant guitar and Ellis' high-register sax melody that in places sounded almost like a flute; definitely a number to satisfy the 'Hughies' in the room.

Taking the show in another 180-degree vibe transition was the closest thing Toronto's ever had to James Brown — Jay Douglas, breakdancing his way down from the bar to the stage in his pinstripe crème suit with a fluidity that put people half his age to shame. What followed were no less than three of the greatest funky soul tunes ever — "Cold Sweat", "I Got The Feeling" and "I Feel Good (I Got You)" — which surely had the notoriously finicky Godfather smiling down from above. The slow soul treatment of "I Feel Good" was ambitious to say the least but brilliantly pulled off, enhancing the power of those simple and timeless lyrics. Douglas' voice has the range from R & B balladeering to melt your heart to primal Godfatheresque soul screaming that stops you in your tracks before it pushes you to the dance floor. And



© Roger Humbert
Pee Wee Ellis



© Roger Humbert
Jay Douglas

before it pushes you to the dance floor. And with Pee Wee Ellis and two Toronto young guns in the house, you could surely still shake your booty to the horns.

After a rapturous response to "I Feel Good", the band staged perhaps the shortest encore segue in history and closed out the night with Van Morrison's "Bright Side of the Road". Nobody on that stage wanted to stop playing and in a different venue they probably would have gone on well past last call. The excitement and passion in Wilson's piano and lead vocals was as high as I've ever seen it. West whipped the crowd into an absolute frenzy with a blazing mandolin volley. Ellis and the horns just did their funky thang. And as they had been all night, the whole band was radiating joy from the kind of experience for which musicians truly live.



Pee Wee Ellis & Jay Douglas

A few minutes later, over a post-show dart, we saw Ellis walk out to his car, simply responding with a humble "thank you" to effusive praises. The great ones truly do their talking through music, especially the horn players. After all, their breath has a higher purpose.

The musicians

Pee Wee Ellis – tenor sax
Jason Wilson – keyboards & vocals
Jay Douglas – vocals
Andrew Stewart – electric bass
Marcus Ali – tenor sax
RJ Satchithananthan – trombone
Iain Green – drums
Dave West – guitar & mandolin
Elisa Gold – backing vocals

We welcome your comments and feedback

Sebastian Cook

sebastiancook@thelivemusicreport.com

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Roger Humbert

rogerh@thelivemusicreport.com

The Live Music Report

reporters@thelivemusicreport.com

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