

**Pop**  
**Jools Holland**  
Royal Albert Hall

★★★★☆

Some of the elements are so familiar that Jools Holland's annual show at the Albert Hall can feel like a trip to a favourite pantomime. You know the storyline, as well as many of the jokes; the scenery doesn't change much. Yet you still come away on a high.

Year in, year out, Holland's band attract all sorts of disparaging remarks from sophisticates. Yet no other working orchestra I can think of combines so many different genres, from ska to swing, gospel to pop, and wraps them in such an exuberant package. To be able to keep touring with this sprawling line-up is no mean feat. Yes, it would be good to give that boogified *Flight of the Bumblebee* piano instrumental a rest once in a while, but the addition of different guest singers each year keeps the rest of the roadshow bubbling along.

Admittedly, this season's VIP, Marc Almond — Holland's partner on his latest album, *A Lovely Life to Live* — was always going to be hit and miss. A cold meant that Almond's voice was even more fragile this time, although he still delivered a serviceable version of *Tainted Love*, much to the delight of the audience. The Édith Piaf anthem *Hymne à l'amour* was more of a stretch, but Almond's sheer passion carried him through.

It was left to a regular, Ruby Turner, to bring the evening to a ferocious climax with yet another of her all-too-brief displays of powerhouse gospel singing. In her hands, *Peace in the Valley* sounded positively apocalyptic. Earlier, Louise Marshall had once again turned in an immaculate display of R'n'B vocals, while the saxophonists Michael "Bammi" Rose and Derek Nash helped to keep spirits high. Holland added crisp homages to Big Bill Broonzy and Dr John. I can't wait to hear him again next year.

**Clive Davis**