

Pop

**Jools Holland
Rhythm & Blues
Orchestra**

Royal Albert Hall

★★★★☆

In some quarters saying you like Jools Holland's big band is akin to confessing that you keep a stash of Max Bygraves LPs under your bed. This puzzles me. Is it because Holland hangs out with Prince Charles? Or because he is invariably the first port of call for TV producers looking for a music presenter?

Purists tend to look down their noses at him because his musicians stray all over the stylistic dial. Yet that, to some of us, is part of the attraction: Holland — who turns 60 next year — runs an outfit that is a glorious throwback to an era when bands courted a broad audience by mixing all sorts of dancefloor rhythms. The last of the legends to do it on this scale, you could argue, was Lionel Hampton, and he has been dead for nearly 20 years. We need someone to keep the tradition alive, and Holland's showmanship and inveterate curiosity make him the ideal candidate.

Yes, there is a hammy streak at times, that boogified version of *Flight of the Bumble Bee* being the prime example. Look beyond the showbiz trimmings, though, and you realise that the programme is a love letter to

ska, swing and other traditions that are nowadays banished to the specialist radio schedules

Fats Domino's passing gave Holland the opportunity to reminisce about visiting the great man three decades ago. José Feliciano, fortunately, is still with us, and opened his cameo with *California Dreamin'* before adding *As You See Me Now*, the title track from the album that he and Holland have just released. There was a certain poignancy in hearing an artist of Feliciano's stature thanking Radio 2 so profusely for placing him on his playlist. A reminder that these are hard times in the music business.

It was a pity that his segment could not have lasted longer. Then again, the short sets are part of the showband formula. Beth Rowley channelled Bessie Smith, Louise Marshall raised the gospel temperature. And at the close Ruby Turner once again upstaged everyone, this time with a rendition of *Let the Good Times Roll* that tipped its hat to the Ray Charles Orchestra and yet sounded, somehow, even bluesier.

Clive Davis

Tour dates: joolsholland.com