

An evening with Bombino at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Oct. 11)

by Max Newman



Really good concerts will allow you to enjoy the music on show; the best ones will allow you to live inside of it. Tuareg musician Bombino's performance at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium on Wednesday, October 11 was certainly an example of the latter. The concert was magical from start to finish.

For someone known as the "Sultan of Shred," Bombino started off with rather subtle, serene instrumentation: Bombino himself on acoustic guitar, Kawissan

Mohamed Alhassan on a more quiet, textural electric guitar, Corey Wilhelm on a large hand drum, and, most interestingly, Djakrave Dia on a seemingly hollow wooden dome, loudly mic'd, that made a water drop-esque noise when softly hit.

This setup may not have been aurally bombastic, but it possessed fantastic power nonetheless. Each musician was at one with their instrument. Bombino in particular seemed to enter a higher state with each mind-bending solo and picked rhythm. His lyrics, sung in the Tuareg language of Tamasheq, may have not been comprehensible to the audience, but their delivery, deep with emotional nuance, made them clear. Some songs had a feeling of contemplative longing, while others were far more direct, like a call to action. Bombino's ability to sing these intense refrains while also plucking complicated melodies was impressive, and to do so consistently over the course of an hour-plus was outrageous.

Alhassan's role as a guitarist was also fascinating. His playing was beautiful but so subtle that it was hard to pick out without actively searching for it. However, take his parts out of each song, and they just wouldn't feel right. He was an atmosphere-provider, the vital backbone of backing tones to Bombino's mesmerizing virtuosity.

This first half of the concert felt like being transported to another world. It was easy to get lost in the beauty of the tones of each instrument as they combined to form a sonic universe that was almost rejuvenating. The audience was traveling through an array of feelings, and Bombino was the guide.

At the end of the sixth song, much to the excitement of the onlooking crowd, most of the band switched instruments: Dia moved to the electric bass, Bombino to the electric guitar, and Wilhelm to a more traditional drum set.

The change in energy was remarkable. If the first half was alluring in its magnificent beauty, this half was for its joyous and exhilarating energy. The audience, which to this point had been sitting obediently in their designated seats, rose up to dance next to the stage. They were showered with the flurry of notes emanating from Bombino's guitar solos, which turned up a notch here — at times his fingers plucked notes with seemingly impossible pace.

The rhythm section was also remarkable. Both the bass and drums were showcased in the musical mix, not only highlighting the talents of both instrumentalists but also creating a wonderfully rich, deep sound. Dia's and Wilhelm's accuracy time and time again in the strict cycles common in Tuareg rock songs was impressive, creating the perfect base for each and every tune.

The sheer excitement in the auditorium during this half of the concert was palpable. Bombino had turned an audience of captivated onlookers into his own enthusiastic dance troupe in the blink of an eye.

Perhaps no song captured this energy like the encore. Framed by Wilhelm's satisfyingly precise drumming and Dia's rhythmic repetitions, Bombino took the audience on a journey through hypnotic note burst after hypnotic note burst, sprinkling in the occasional solo that seemed to turn and wind every which way. His lyrics, chorused by Alhassan on backing vocals, filled the auditorium, defiant and beautiful. Truly, captivating to no end.

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