

Blur's gig in city was 'a real moment in history'

Review

IT was a rare and magical night which the 400 lucky gig-goers who managed to get their hands on the hardest-to-come-by ticket in town will never forget.

But Blur's pocket-sized explosion at Colchester Arts Centre on Friday night also represented a beautiful full-circle moment for the rock icons themselves.

As frontman Damon Albarn alluded to midway through their 23-song set, the band have never "actually played Colchester" before under the moniker of Blur.

Dubbed "the show we never thought would happen" - for good reason given the magnitude of Blur and intimacy of the venue - the gig marked their first in eight years.

But despite their time away from the stage the quartet delivered a 23-song set with all the assured swagger and conviction expected from a group of their stature.

After somewhat humbly strolling onto the stage, Blur kicked-off proceedings with St Charles Square, a song taken from their forthcoming new album *The Ballad of Darren*.

The more familiar sounds of *There's No Other Way* and *Popszene* followed.

Parklife was arguably the highlight of the show.

After a teasing introduction, the ferocious *Song 2* blew the doors off the jam-packed venue.

Following initial set-closer *This Is A Low*, the band exited before returning moments later for an encore of *Girls and Boys*, *The Narcissist*, *Tender* and *For Tomorrow*.

But on what was a moving night for the homegrown heroes it was *The Universal* - oozing with poignant melancholy - which concluded the once-in-a-lifetime gig.

And its sentimental traits only served to further confirm this Colchester comeback was more than just the Wembley Stadium warm-up gig it had been billed as.

This was in fact a trip down memory lane and a platform from which the rockers could slingshot themselves if only for a moment back to the carefree days they spent together as youngsters.

Over the course of those two very special hours, Damon, Graham, Dave and Alex, each of whom exuded a giddy childlike innocence and beaming smile throughout, were able to relive those priceless, fleeting moments.

As one fan told me before the show, Blur performing in Colchester felt like a "real moment in history". What a privilege it was to be a small part of it.

Blur on Colchester, first gig and Parklife

Blur gave the Gazette an exclusive chat about sold out gig and life in the city

By **GEORGE KING**
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BLUR "are back" according to enthused bassist Alex James, and we have little reason to disagree after witnessing their exhilarating show at Colchester Arts Centre.

The music maestros confirmed their return to the stage after an eight-year hiatus earlier this year after they announced two massive gigs at Wembley Stadium.

Anticipation surrounding the Britpop group's comeback was then pushed into overdrive - not least in the offices of media outlets such as ours - when they unveiled four warm-up dates.

Each show was to be performed within the most intimate of settings, with the very first destination listed on the tour poster being Blur's sort-of birthplace - Colchester.

Unsurprisingly, the prospect of seeing the stadium ensemble on a stage no bigger than a living room saw thousands scramble to get their hands on the hottest ticket in town.

Much to the disappointment of pretty much anyone and everyone who has ever heard Parklife, however, tickets sold out within seconds in what was a blink-a-you'll-miss-it sale.

But for the 400 lucky fans who did manage to defy the odds and secure access to Colchester Arts Centre's biggest ever concert, a night of history beckoned.

"It will get quite hot," warned Damon during an exclusive, media-only Q&A at Colchester Castle ahead of the legendary show.

"We approach these [types of gigs] in exactly the same way [we approach big shows] really.

"The difference between Wembley Stadium and Colchester Arts Centre is that this is our first gig in eight years.

"It will be a nice experience for everybody."

Drummer Dave, who was born in Colchester, attended The Gilbert School and worked for Colchester Council, also addressed the band's return to the city early on.

He added: "There are not many spaces in Colchester where you can put things on to be honest.



■ Interview - Blur take questions at Colchester Castle ahead of their historic comeback

"It was we either did the gig at the castle and the press conference at the Arts Centre or vice versa.

"I have not been to Colchester Castle since I was a kid and it was the most boring school trip. It was really, really dull, but they have pepped it up a bit since then.

"The Arts Centre though is one of the few places in Colchester where you can do something and there is stuff on every night - there's bands, comedy, jazz, you name it.

"So, we spent a lot of time there."

Just over 24 hours before the band's performance in Colchester, details of their new album *The Ballad of Darren* emerged, alongside lead single *The Narcissist*.

The ten-track record, Blur's first since *The Magic Whip* in 2015, was produced by acclaimed sonic whizz James Ford and recorded at Studio 13 in London and Devon.

Frontman Damon has described the LP, named after a close friend of the band who had pressured him to finish a song he had worked on for 25 years, as an "aftershock record".

The album was primarily written in secret by Damon, who studied alongside Graham at The Stanway School, while he was out and about on tour with Gorillaz.

But when he finally unveiled what he had been working on, childhood friend Graham - from a guitar player's perspective - was thrilled with the material he had been given to work with.

"Damon's openness was something I really welcomed because it

gives me a lot of pointers for what I am going to be doing in each song," he said.

"It does not mean it is easy somehow - it is a heck of a responsibility to support that kind of emotion or openness with music. But that is my job."

Damon's approach also piqued the interest of Alex and Dave, helping to tease each member out of their own respective rabbit holes and catalyse the band's comeback.

Alex said: "Because this does not happen very often it feels fresh and special.

"There has been something very special about playing together again - but it was there right from the get-go.

"I don't know why I am surprised it is still there but I am delighted and I feel fulfilled and blessed. We continue to evolve. We are back.

"I think it is worth saying this time we have taken it right back to basics and it is just the four of us."

"That is really how we wanted to play live as well," adds Damon.

"We wanted to imagine Wembley as us at our purest and uncomplicated. So really, how we play tonight [in Colchester] will be how we play at Wembley."

But despite all the excitement surrounding their long-awaited comeback, chit-chat about the new record and the looming Wembley gigs, Damon's mind is focused elsewhere.

"Can I reserve the old Axe Music sign?," he jokingly asked me directly.

"The Chinese restaurant that was there after it closed down has

taken down their sign and it has revealed the old Axe Music sign.

"I would like to buy that and you are obviously hooked up and have influence [in Colchester].

"It is where I bought my first synthesiser."

Prior to the conclusion of the Q&A I was invited to ask the band one light-hearted question - something which might coax a wry smile, if not a slight chuckle.

In many ways I already suspected the answer I would receive upon quizzing the chief songwriter on whether or not Parklife is in fact about Colchester Castle Park.

But the good-spirited exchange I experienced with a musical icon in Damon Albarn - if only fleetingly - was more than worth the minor tingle of apprehension I felt when it was put to the band.

"Absolutely not, it is far more about Hyde Park really," said Damon.

From the row, inches away from a world-beloved band who have more Number 1 records than I have pounds in my bank account, I quickly - and cheekily interjected.

"Can you just say it is?," I responded, much to the amusement of both band and surrounding press.

Thankfully, Damon humoured me, and indulged my cheap attempt to get the answer I ideally would have preferred to have been given.

Most probably with an internal eye-roll, but an external smile, nonetheless, he conceded: "Yes, it is, completely [about Castle Park]."

Well then, there you have it.