

IT TAKES TWO

Almost 30 years and 15 albums into his career, there's no doubting **Courtney Pine's** stature as one of the greatest saxophonists this country has ever produced: his awe-inspiring technique and stage presence more than matched by his knack of creating music that immediately resonates with his audiences.

Yet after taking his ska and reggae roots into the stratosphere with his skanking *House of Legends* album, he's come back down to earth for his new album, *Song (The Ballad Book)*, with multi-award winning pianist **Zoe Rahman**. Both spoke to **Alyn Shipton** about their musical partnership and Pine explains how British jazz remains a force for uniting people in our increasingly polarised times

Just a few hours after we talk, Courtney Pine will be off to play in Japan, where his silver soprano saxophone will again conjure up the magic of the Caribbean in a series of *House of Legends* concerts. That dance-inflected, contagiously rhythmic programme has been the cornerstone of his repertoire in the last couple of years, and his new venture – a reflective set of ballads for his bass clarinet and Zoe Rahman's piano – could hardly be more different. But, as he talks about the new project, his pre-tour dashing about stops for a while, and Pine himself takes on a reflective mode.

"Playing in a duo should be easy," he says, "but actually it's involved a lot of hard work. I've never done an album like this before, or taken on a follow-on tour with just one other musician, like the one we'll be doing from February to July. But over the years I have played very occasionally in a duo. It started with Geri Allen, who was on my 1995 album *Modern Day Jazz Stories*, and we did some duo numbers together during the tour here in the UK."

Selecting a duo partner for a full-on project like *Song (The Ballad Book)* is quite a challenge, but Courtney knew soon after meeting her that Rahman had the right kind of musical empathy for this to work. "I first met her," he recalls, "at the BBC Jazz Awards, when I was co-presenting the event with Humphrey Lyttelton. She came backstage and knocked on my door. With some people that might seem to be a bit brash, but with Zoe it was more that she just wanted to say hello, and that we knew a lot of people in common. She's a fantastic musician, who's as at home exploring classical music as she is playing jazz or investigating her Bangladeshi heritage, so we stayed in touch."

Rahman recalls that her first really significant meeting with Pine came a little later than that award ceremony at the QEH. "It was years ago when he was presenting his *Jazz Crusade* on BBC Radio 2, and he interviewed me about my first album *The Cynic*. He played a track on air, and afterwards told me he was a fan. I met

him a few times after that, and then when Alex Wilson had to drop out of a couple of gigs on Courtney's *Transition in Tradition* tour, I ended up deputising with the band in Manchester. After that I played with him on the *Europa* album and tour, and he played a track on my album *Kindred Spirits*. He called me about this project towards the end of last year. I'd had a baby in February, and had been pretty full-on with all the things that motherhood demands, but Courtney gave me the impetus to get near a piano and practice seriously again. Then to go into the studio with him and spend two days sitting at a fantastic Steinway was a real luxury!"

One thing that is immediately apparent about the album is that Pine's own playing

"If you play the bass clarinet or the bass flute meditatively, something in you changes by the time you finish the performance. I felt I was getting into the frequency of the planet itself with those low notes."

Courtney Pine

seems different. He's always been the master of the lightning fast line, deftly negotiating twists and turns of phrasing and harmony that ordinary mortals can only dream of hearing and playing. But here, and particularly on a resonant, melodic version of 'Amazing Grace', his playing is spacious, pared back and melodic. "That's my favourite track," he laughs, "and no it's not full of notes. The performance was improvised, but I was going the other way from some of my playing. I couldn't have done it when I was 19 when there were scales everywhere. Now I have a thing about the vocal line, and I think there's a different kind of virtuosity in what you don't play.

The subject matter – the melody, the poem and the way it was written – are important. They're what give the track its weight, and I've even very subtly overdubbed some of the lower bass clarinet notes, to give just a hint of a bagpipe feel. But overall, this piece is about what we took away, not what we added."

The definition of ballad on the album is a broad one. "They're songs that have affected me, modern standards that I've grown up with," says Pine. This means that there are jazz standards, and then there are ballads drawn from pop repertoire, from Donny Hathaway, Brian McKnight, and Chaka Khan.

"It was fun learning them," adds Rahman. "They're very much Courtney's choice of material, and I didn't know all the pieces when his list arrived. I began by listening to versions on YouTube, until I had them in my head. By the time we got to the studio, although we did a very small amount of arranging, we just played. Some of the best pieces on the album were just one take, but that's great because it's kept the sense of spontaneity."

If Rahman's homework was to sit down and get inside the harmonies and structure of the pieces, Pine's research was on a whole different level. At the heart of the disc is a beautiful reading of 'A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square'. And for that, he took himself out and about.

"As I'm a Londoner, that song is special for me," he muses. "Like several of the tracks, it wasn't perhaps a natural bass clarinet piece. I had to think how to approach it. I wanted to catch a change of mood in the lyrics, where they say:

*"The streets of town were paved with stars,
It was such a romantic affair"*

The feeling had to change, just as the words do when they continue:

"We kissed and said goodnight."

"So I went out into Berkeley Square and played the piece at ten at night. Exploring