

Interview: The Blackbyrds
By: Stewart Dalley

To the uneducated 70's music is summed up by crap cheesy disco hits or progressive rock bands taking fret wanking to its logical conclusion. To the more astute the 70's was a golden era in black music. While the groundwork may well have been laid in the 60's the 70's was when it really came to fruition. If the 60's were a musical feet-finding, the 70's was where experimentation came into play. The period saw many of the big players on the scene prove to the major labels that they could churn out the hits, while taking some musical risks. Hence why in the midst of the 70's the freedom to express musical ideas was at last available to some of the most talented musicians the world is ever likely to see.

When talk turns to black musical masters the name Donald Byrd is quite rightly often mooted. The feathered one's CV is a veritable musician's wet dream, name checking jazz greats like Art Blakey, Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane along the way. No slouch musically or as a scholar, with a PhD in Afro-American Music and a law degree to his name. Donald Byrd's passion and inspiration for his much celebrated lifelong learning was always music; through which he gained a true picture of how it had shaped and comforted his people. Proof positive, if needed of his convictions, lie in his reasoning for taking up a law degree. In that the only way to discover more about black people (given that there is scant material of them being in the world prior to 1865) was to study the legalities of slavery and the subsequent court cases.

It was during one such excursion with education that led to the formation of The Blackbyrds, Donald the then lecturer in Afro-American Music put together a group of jazz/funk musicians from Howard University to embrace the fusion sound that was emanating from jazz circles. Today the band is still in existence, albeit minus Donald and a couple of others, as founding member and still drummer supreme Keith Killgo explained. "The group today consists of Joe Hall (bass), Orville Saunders (guitar), Marvin Keys (saxophone), Sam Smith (vox), Raymond Angry (keys) and myself on drums."

While the line-up may have changed along the road the group's passion to embrace the new without forgetting the old has led them to take to the road one last time as 'The Blackbyrds'. "We stopped performing as a group back in 81' or '82 and we tried to do a couple of reunions but the energy wasn't right.....you know certain things need to marinate for a period of time. We tried a few things..... even getting back with Donald fell through, so we all just went on our merry way. Then in '98 a guy called Chris Morgans from Internal Bass Records called me at my home and said 'I've been looking for you for the last 25 years', I was like 'well I haven't been anywhere'. He asked me how I'd like to come to London and reform The Blackbyrds." Call it fate or just good timing but after a few phone calls The Blackbyrds were back together performing their first concert in nearly 20 years.

Where The Blackbyrds differ though from the current slue of old groups reforming to cash-in on their back catalogue, is that the guys in the group are set to release new material even going as far as to drop their name, as Keith divulges. "We're going to abandon the name Blackbyrds after these gigs where-after we'll be known as Kojo (the original name of The Blackbyrds). 'This World' will be the name of the new records, which will be out in March 2001 on Crosswire Records. On the album we've got some collaborations with people like Norman Connors and Freddie Jackson. We've been rejuvenated or revitalised or whatever happens to a group, we are all just really looking forward to releasing the new material."

While we wait with eager anticipation the new material, lets hope they ditch the other vanguard of older group meets new material, that of going too modern. Let's pray that they don't kill the spirit of the Blackbyrds in the chase for the new.